

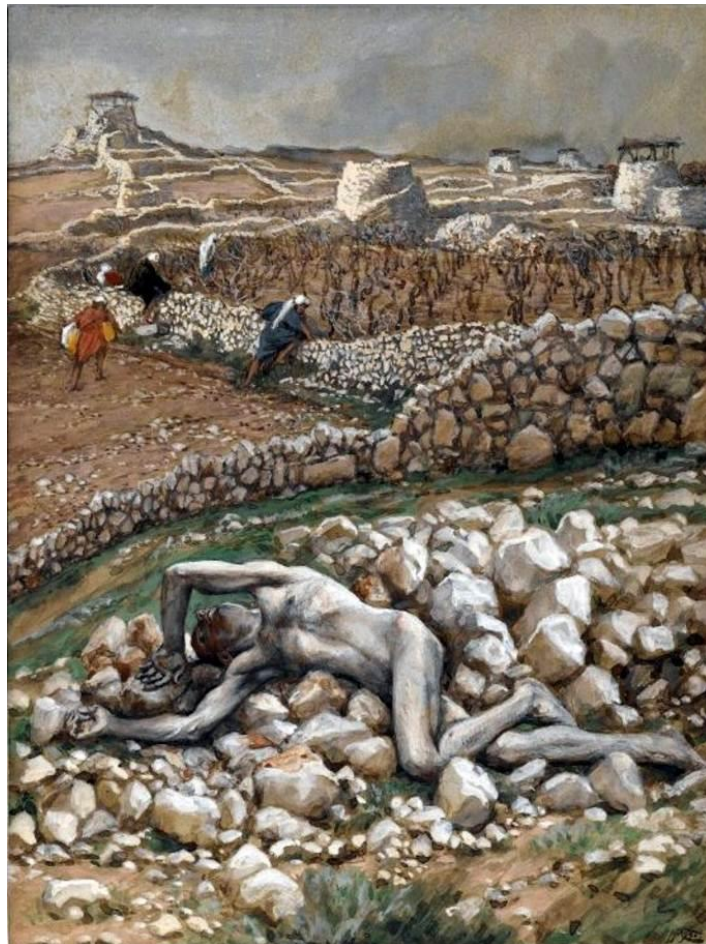


Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Breaking Open the Word
Mary Birmingham

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time A



Parable of the Vineyard, James Tissot, between 1886 and 1894



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

Saint Francis' Prayer in Praise of God, Given to Brother Leo

You are holy, Lord, the only God,
and Your deeds are wonderful.

You are strong.

You are great.

You are the Most High.

You are Almighty.

You, Holy Father are King of heaven and earth.

You are Three and One, Lord God, all Good.

You are Good, all Good, supreme Good, Lord God, living
and true.

You are love.

You are wisdom.

You are humility.

You are endurance.

You are rest.

You are peace.

You are joy and gladness.

You are justice and moderation.

You are all our riches, and You suffice for us.

You are beauty.

You are gentleness.

You are our protector.

You are our guardian and defender.

You are our courage.

You are our haven and our hope.

You are our faith, our great consolation.

You are our eternal life, Great and Wonderful Lord, God
Almighty, Merciful Savior. Amen.

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connect with *Catholic
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today's liturgy is a proclamation of God's saving, sovereign power. Try as we may we have no control over our world.
- ▶ Salvation history records a God who is in intimate relationship with his people—a God who consoles, nurtures, reconciles, prunes, challenges and forgives his people.
- ▶ Jesus understood (understands) the human heart—our ability to love and our ability to grievously sin.
- ▶ Jesus understands humanity's propensity for denial, lack of faithfulness, and self-righteousness.
- ▶ Jesus' parables were instruments of challenge—they were his very clever way of helping people to acknowledge their blindness and culpability when it comes to the sin in their lives.
- ▶ Thus, Jesus' catechism on Christian living continues today.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First reading: Isaiah 5, 1-7

- ▶ The oracle from today's reading from Isaiah draws from the lived experience of the people, just as Jesus did in his use of parable.
- ▶ The owner of the vineyard sings about his vineyard.
- ▶ The vineyard was a common metaphor for the kingdom of God throughout Biblical history.
- ▶ Vineyards were plentiful in the northern kingdom of Judah.
- ▶ Vineyards needed constant care: pruning, cutting, tilling the soil, watering and removal of excess clippings. Borders and walls that protected the vineyard also needed constant care.
- ▶ The vinedresser worked tirelessly to maintain his vineyard.
- ▶ Maintaining the vineyard was not a one-person job.
- ▶ Every vineyard had its own winepress and people were needed to press the grapes with their feet.
- ▶ People were also needed to secure the property against thieves and marauders.
- ▶ Watchmen stood guard in a tower erected on the perimeter of the property.
- ▶ The vinedresser planted nothing but the finest grapes in hopes of yielding a bountiful harvest.
- ▶ The people believed in God's bountiful grace and mercy. God protected the vineyard and provided an ample harvest for his people, in actuality as well as in metaphor.
- ▶ Metaphorically God pruned, cultivated and cared for his crop: the people of his kingdom. He removed their stony, sinful hearts.

- ▶ The people however sinned thus preventing God the bountiful harvest that the Divine Vinedresser deserved.
- ▶ Isaiah's oracle ends with a call to judgment.
- ▶ God did what God always does—God is faithful no matter what. The people, on the other hand, failed in their covenant relationship.
- ▶ Isaiah leaves nothing to the imagination. Israel is the vineyard and Israel produced a less than bountiful harvest.
- ▶ They promised to live in covenant relationship with God; they promised to love God with heart soul and mind, to love neighbor as much as self and to care for God's creation.
- ▶ Evidence of faithful covenant living would be observed by the way they treated the least among them.
- ▶ Isaiah accused the people of the most heinous acts of murder and lack of fidelity.
- ▶ God's sentence therefore is just. The people brought the sentence down upon themselves.
- ▶ God would no longer provide his care and protection of the vineyard.
- ▶ God would now withhold his protective care from the people of Israel.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What does this reading tell us about God and about God's relationship with his people?
- ▶ What does God expect from his people?
- ▶ Is there enough evidence in your life that you are living in covenant relationship with God? What does that mean to you?
- ▶ What does this reading teach us about ourselves?

Second Reading: Philippians 4, 6-9

- ▶ Paul continues Jesus' catechism on Christian living. He exhorts the Philippian community in the ways of Christian life. He teaches them what it means to live in community.
- ▶ Paul reminds them that the root of faith is hope. Worry has no place in the Christian lived experience.
- ▶ He does not discount the honest suffering that people endure. He was not naive. He knew the difficulties of living in the secular world.

- ▶ He was aware of the challenges that people face as they try to live the Christian life. He knew only too well the persecution and hostility believers endure.
- ▶ The menacing military presence provided untold stress in their lives.
- ▶ Christians were under constant scrutiny by the Roman leadership. They feared this new sect's allegiance to their supposed "messiah". They were a perceived threat to order.
- ▶ The influx of Gentile Christians was also a challenge for the newly formed Christian community. The conservative sect called Judaizers were insistent that new Gentile Christians adhere to strict Jewish law.
- ▶ They tried to force circumcision upon them.
- ▶ It is no wonder that Paul felt compelled to console and uplift the Philippians.
- ▶ He reminded them that the rewards of faithfulness are eternal.
- ▶ He exhorted them to be diligent in prayer and be faithful to the truth passed on to them about God in Christ.
- ▶ A sure antidote to fear and anxiety over such issues was faith and faithfulness to the tradition.
- ▶ The community could then be assured of a serenity and peace that only God can give.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ In what way, if any, is this letter a relevant letter today?
- ▶ What are the stresses in your life that get in the way of your relationship with God and the community?
- ▶ How can we compare what is going on in our world with the challenges the Philippian community faced?
- ▶ Have you ever experienced a peace in the face of turmoil that only God can give?

Gospel: Matthew 21, 33-34

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

- ▶ Throughout Israelite history the vineyard is a metaphor for the people of Israel and the reign of God.
- ▶ Today's parable tells the story of the estate owner who hired tenants to tend his vineyard.
- ▶ The owner sent his representatives to collect the rent on the leased land.
- ▶ The tenants stoned and killed the servants who attempted to collect the rent.
- ▶ The owner then sent his son, believing they would never be so emboldened to kill his son.
- ▶ Jesus' allusion to the fate of the prophets was not to be missed by his first century listeners. They too were stoned and killed when sent to proclaim God's word to the people.
- ▶ The tenants arrogantly meted the same fate upon the owner's son.
- ▶ Listeners stand at attention. What will happen now? How will punishment be handed down to the guilty murderers?
- ▶ Matthew/Jesus uses familiar Christian images to answer their curiosity.
- ▶ Jesus was understood by the early Christians to be the *cornerstone* of God's reign.
- ▶ When the leaders of Israel rejected him they rejected the cornerstone of the promised kingdom.
- ▶ Jesus sadly was a stumbling stone for some in Israel yet ironically he would take that stone and crush enemies of God's reign.
- ▶ The question remains: what will happen to those scoundrel tenants (the religious leaders)?
- ▶ Since they missed what God was doing in Christ, or rather, refused to see what God was doing in Christ, they would lose their right to the promised vineyard. It would be taken from them and given to the Gentiles who would in turn yield a great harvest.
- ▶ Rather than a focus on Israel's past sins, this pericope in Matthew's gospel serves as a warning to his community. The kingdom can be lost.
- ▶ The message is clear: beware, be diligent and live according to the demands of the Gospel of Christ or the same fate will befall them—they too can lose what was entrusted to them.
- ▶ It is as relevant message today as it was then.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist stops at this point and invites response to the following questions.

- ▶ The people of Israel thought they were faithful servants of God, yet they missed what God was doing right under their noses. Have you ever failed to see God's action in your life?
- ▶ How can you prevent that from happening in the future?

- ▶ The backdrop for this parable is Jesus' troubles with the religious leaders.
- ▶ His mission is coming close to fulfillment. He brings news of God's will into the heart of Judaism; he takes it to Jerusalem.
- ▶ He takes the message to Israel's leadership. He challenges them to see what God is doing.
- ▶ In spite of their faithfulness to the Scriptures—the Torah—Jesus rebuked them for their blindness when it comes to seeing what God was doing in their present, lived reality. It was a refusal to believe in God's ongoing active presence in their lives.
- ▶ They refuse to see what God was doing in Christ and what was prophesied by the prophet John the Baptist.
- ▶ They were the ones with the responsibility to lead the people into the bosom of God's care. They chose instead to rebel against God. God's justice would be swift.
- ▶ They would be expelled from the vineyard.
- ▶ Matthew's message is clear. God has blessed this emerging Christian sect over and above Israel.
- ▶ Matthew's Jesus posits his doctrine for the Matthean community.
 - The Christian Gentile mission is authentic.
 - The Christian community—not Israel—is the rightful heir of the kingdom.
 - The leaders of Israel rejected what God was doing in and through Christ.
 - Self-righteous, legalistic, arrogant posturing by religious leaders would not be tolerated in the reign of God.
 - The primary mission of believers is to restore and maintain the reign of God.
 - God's saving grace is gratuitous and unmerited; it can be lost. Salvation is lost through arrogant, self-righteous behavior, by a failure to repent, lack of attention to one's spiritual life, idolatry and excessive attention to things of this world, and through sin and violence.
 - Prophets of the Lord can expect the same fate as the prophets who went before them
 - When a believer embraces the Gospel of Christ and commits his or her life to it, then that believer can expect sorrow, suffering, rejection and persecution.

- Power and greed can lead to death and the loss of one's salvation.
- God judges us by God's standards, not ours.
- God embraces the sinner and forgives them—God chastises the self-righteous.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ In what way is this a relevant word for us today?
- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ What does the Gospel tell us is expected of us?
- ▶ It is important for us to reflect on the reality that salvation can be lost through our pride, presuming to know more than God, our inattention to our spiritual life, idolatry, putting other things before our relationship with God, unchecked sin and violence. Some religious traditions insist that if you accept Jesus you are saved-period. Catholicism insists that salvation is a free gift from God but it can be lost or frittered away. Even though faith is a freely given gift from God, what can we do to cooperate with this gift of grace?
- ▶ It is very easy to become lackadaisical in our attention to spiritual matters and thus fall back and not remain attentive to our life of faith. What can you do to insure that you will remain steadfast?
- ▶ What are some of the obstacles that might get in the way of you remaining steadfast in your life of faith?
- ▶ Put yourself in today's parable. Has there ever been a time when you could relate to the tenants and reject God's messenger? Has there ever been a time when you were God's messenger and were thus rejected?
- ▶ What evidence is there that you are doing what is expected of you?
- ▶ What should you be doing, something that is expected of you, that you are not presently doing? What can you do to change that?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question. (@ three minutes)

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR
Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

- What should you be doing—something that is expected of you—that you are not presently doing? What can you do to change that?

So many times over the course of this project I have shared about the mental illness of my adult son. We have suffered with him for over fourteen years. I was reading a session I wrote over two years ago in which I was praising God for his improved condition. I shared how he had been medicine compliant for over a year and we were reveling in having our son back.

Sadly as often happens in the course of this disease his cooperation with the disease was not long lasting. Two years have passed and he is sicker than he has ever been. I often witness to the power of God in my life and the many miracles. Yet as today's Gospel reminds us there is unexplainable suffering as we walk this journey with the Lord. My son's illness is the greatest sorrow of our lives. Aside from the devastation of his life and his inability to live a normal life in society, it is often nightmarish to live with him. On the one hand he is the sweetest, most loving person you would ever want to meet. You can see the presence of God within him. He cannot contain it; it spills out of him. He never returns guile for guile shown to him. He repeatedly tells me how much he loves me and cares for me. He is a brilliant young man whose intelligence has not served him well. He thinks he can "think" himself out of this disease. He is the most faith-filled person I know. Yet, living with him is tortuous. Details are not necessary but with each passing day I think I cannot endure another day. We never know when we return home from work if the house will have burned down or some other catastrophe had befallen him or us.

God graces me with the endurance to forge ahead but I must admit of late that my tolerance level is non-existent. Anger overtakes me and I respond to his behavior often times in a fury. I know God is asking me to find another way to deal with this tragedy, but rather than turn each incident over to God's guiding wisdom, I impulsively respond. I never know what the "right" thing to do is. We have no recourse to help him in the secular world. My desire is to be there for him, to love him and to offer a safe sanctuary, but our efforts mostly fall short.

My fervent prayer is for God to release me from this anger and give me the wisdom to deal with the day-to-day horrors of this disease. When in the midst of turmoil I often forget to ask for help.

Thus, my prayer is that God leads me when it comes to this very sick child and transform my heart so that I may become detached enough to deal with him in love and God's mercy. I am still trying to figure out what that means.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Cross and Paschal Mystery
Salvation/Soteriology
Mary Model for the Church
Jesus Christ

Church and Ecclesiology
Prayer
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

CROSS AND PASCHAL MYSTERY

The owner's messenger sent to collect the rent was killed in the parable Jesus told in today's Gospel. It is an allusion to the Lord's prophets who throughout history have been killed in service of their Lord and God. It is the fate of all faithful disciples. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention today on the ultimate prophet and Savior who gave his life for the many. Today's session will address the CROSS AND PASCHAL MYSTERY.

SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation history is a chronicle of God's giving, caring, nurturing, punishing, restoring, pruning, chastising and loving providence. People have always forgotten and continue to forget that there is a God and *they are not it*. The liturgies of these weeks herald this salvation history and God's role in human history. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY.

MARY MODEL FOR THE CHURCH

October is the month we remember and honor the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and model disciple. It is thus appropriate we focus our attention this month and in today's session on MARY, MODEL DISCIPLE.

JESUS CHRIST

When the tenants of the land (Israel's religious leaders) rejected Jesus, they rejected the foundation of the kingdom. Jesus, the present stumbling block for so many, would become the Savior of the world. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention today on what the Church teaches us about JESUS CHRIST.

CHURCH ECCLESIOLOGY

The letter to the Philippians is a catechism for Christians living in community. Paul sets out to teach the members of his fledgling community how to live in harmony in community. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY.

PRAYER

Paul reminded his community to remain steadfast in prayer in the midst of persecution. The military presence was a constant threat to Christians. The Judaizers were suspicious and a threat to Gentile Christians. Their existence was tenuous at best. Paul encouraged the Philippians to remain faithful to God and to pray for the strength to endure. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention today on what the Church teaches about PRAYER.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.